



What is a walk through?

A walk through is a process developed in New York City's District 2 and promoted by the Institute of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh to better understand and support improvement in teaching and learning.¹ We have found that a walk through is most effective when it is used in connection with the implementation of a curriculum or instructional approach (i.e., standards-based curriculum, literacy or math instructional strategies) and when attention is placed on what students are learning. In general, there are three different types of walk throughs that can be used, depending on the purpose and the participants.

- *Administrative walkabouts* are for one person — a principal or an assistant principal — to gather information and to provide feedback to individual teachers.
- *Collegial walk throughs* are for groups of teachers or administrators to gather information and to discuss the information/data they gather for the purpose of deepening their learning, developing next steps, and providing general feedback.
- *Extended collegial walk throughs* include “outsiders” to the school chosen for a particular purpose to gather information and to provide feedback on a school’s progress or plans.

In each case, the walk through has three parts:

- A clear focus or purpose that is discussed and understood by administrators and teachers in advance.
- Short (5-to-7-minute) visits to multiple classrooms to gather evidence on student learning related to the purpose.
- A debriefing session to (1) clarify and reach agreement on the evidence gathered across classrooms, and (2) plan next steps.

GUIDELINES FOR ADMINISTRATIVE WALKABOUTS

The purpose of the walkabouts is to improve communication about teaching and learning. In walkabouts, administrators gather information about classroom instruction, across the school and within specific classrooms, and provide specific nonevaluative feedback to teachers. To be effective, the walkabouts need to be conducted on a regular schedule — either daily or at least three times a week — and the administrator should visit and provide feedback to each teacher at least once a week. (NOTE: In schools in which assistant principals have responsibility for supervising teachers, they should conduct weekly walkabouts so that all teachers are visited weekly).

- Administrators notify teachers about the focus of the walkabout in advance. The focus can extend over a week, month, or year, and can be the same schoolwide or vary for grade levels or departments.

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- Administrators visit classrooms for about 5 minutes to gather evidence of what students are learning by speaking with a few students and by examining student work, the room environment, and instruction, before moving on to the next classroom.
- Administrators provide feedback to each teacher. Feedback should include *strengths* (“I was impressed by...”), *questions* (“I wonder about ...”), and, when appropriate, *next steps* (“Can I bring some teachers to see how you ...” or “I would like to talk with you about ...”). Feedback, while always necessary, can be delivered in different ways — notes left in classrooms or mail boxes, e-mails, or one-legged interviews (see description of one-legged interviews).

GUIDELINES FOR A COLLEGIAL OR EXTENDED COLLEGIAL WALK THROUGH

A collegial walk through is an organized nonevaluative visit by teams through a school to examine teaching and learning. A collegial walk through provides an opportunity to do the following:

- Reinforce attention to a **focus on instruction and learning** in the school’s improvement plan.
- Gather **data about instructional practice and student learning** to supplement other data about school and student performance.
- Stimulate **collegial conversation** about teaching and learning by asking questions about what evidence is and isn’t observed.
- Learn from **other participants’** observations, questions, experiences, and perspectives.
- Deepen understandings and practices with **continuous feedback**.

Process

The collegial walk through with teams whose members are either internal or external to the school (e.g., colleagues, central office staff, and consultants) is primarily for the benefit of the principal and/or staff visited. Therefore it falls to the principal or the school staff to direct all three parts of the walk through, including ensuring adequate time to prepare in a pre-walk through session (usually not less than 30 minutes); organizing the classroom visits; and debriefing the visits (usually about 45 minutes). The number of classrooms visited is determined by the remaining amount of time available to the participants.

Pre-Walk Through Session

- The principal/school staff identifies the focus for the walk through, the classrooms to be visited, and the rationale for visiting each room.
- Because there is never enough time for discussion, participants must limit their questions and conversation to points that help clarify the focus and the reasons for visiting a classroom (i.e., the principal might refer to a log or notes from previous visits).
- Conversations identify the expectations/evidence the school hopes to find.
- In subsequent visits around a particular focus, the conversations about classrooms become more specific about what was observed in previous visits, the principal’s/staff’s work with teachers, and changes in practice that may be observed (i.e., in student work, physical changes in the classroom).
- Graphic organizers might be used to help provide feedback (see the notes for collegial and extended collegial walk throughs).

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Collegial Walk Throughs

- At least two team members should visit a classroom together. There is no ideal number, but four- or five-person teams can gather a lot of data in a few minutes. More than four or five visitors in a classroom at a time can seem overwhelming to teachers and students.
- Team members typically spend 5 to 10 minutes in each classroom and 5 minutes in the hall immediately afterward writing their notes and having preliminary conversations following each classroom visit. Team members are careful not to disrupt classes (or the teachers) by discussing their observations within range of others.
- Team members gather evidence of what students are learning that does or does not support the focus (including examining student work in portfolios/folders, on the wall, and in process during the visit; talking with students; observing instruction and classroom interactions).
- Depending on the focus question, all parts of the school (i.e., the school's entrance and hallways) may contain evidence and should be considered as part of the walk through.
- Team members should refrain from providing feedback directly to teachers. Principals and leadership teams are in a better position to provide feedback.

Debriefing the Walk Throughs

- The primary purpose of the debriefing session is to provide the principal/school staff with data on the focus. Team members should discuss their observations, provide specific evidence, and question one another.
- It is important to remember that infrequent visitors to a school or classroom are receiving only a glimpse of the school or a teacher. Walk throughs are most useful in raising questions rather than drawing conclusions (such as “I would like to know more about ...,” or “I wonder whether...,” rather than “Teacher x relies on direct instruction too much”).
- Team members should provide advice on ways to improve teaching and learning, based on their perspective and experience.
- Principals and school staff need to decide how to provide feedback to the teachers whose classrooms were observed — orally, in writing, or both. One way of organizing feedback is to begin with strengths, followed by things to work on/next steps, and then things to consider.

All substantive conversation should remain on the focus and the evidence gathered during the visit. However, there are times when team members might identify and suggest foci for future walk throughs.

NOTE: There may be times when collegial walk throughs are organized more for the benefit of the team members than to provide feedback to the school. Arranging feedback to teachers is still important, even though it may be unexpected. For example, team members might be asked to leave notes about “Something I am going to steal ...,” “Strengths I saw ...,” or “Have you thought about ...”

ⁱ For additional information, see

Ginsberg, M., & Murphy, D. (2002). How walkthroughs open doors. *Educational Leadership*, 59(8), 34–36;
McDonald, J. (2002). Teachers studying student work: Why and how? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(3), 120–127; and
Richardson, J. (2001). Seeing through new eyes. *Tools for Schools*, National Staff Development Council.

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